

---

# Might makes right

By Tim Judah  
LAT - 17/8/2008

---

Breakaway movements such as South Ossetia's and Kosovo's tend to become proxies for the great powers.

A few months ago, I traveled to Sukhumi, a balmy, war-wrecked seaside resort that is the capital of Abkhazia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as anyone who has followed the news of the last week cannot fail to know, are the two breakaway regions of Georgia. In pelting rain, I crossed the Inguri River from Georgia proper into Abkhazia and noticed that the Georgians had erected a giant sculpture on their side. It was of a pistol pointing at Abkhazia, but the barrel of the gun had been tied in a knot.

Even before the guns started firing 10 days ago, this gesture of peace and conciliation was a pretty futile one. Indeed, when I visited, there seemed no hope of a peaceful resolution to these two disputes, nor to two others that have dogged the Caucasus since the early 1990s. These are Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian-controlled enclave that is technically within Azerbaijan, and Transnistria, the breakaway part of Moldova.

The roots of these conflicts run deep, and they are nothing peculiar to the post-Soviet space. The battles may go into remission, or a long "frozen conflict" phase, but even with the best goodwill in the world, they may never be resolved peacefully. Breakaways also tend to become the playthings of the great powers, which find them convenient as proxies in bigger conflicts. This has been the fate of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are useful to Russia to destabilize Georgia, and was the U.S.-cast role of Iraqi Kurdistan before the fall of Saddam Hussein.

That just compounds the near-impossibility of finding any resolution. For example, attempts to peacefully solve the Gordian knot that is Cyprus have failed miserably. After decades of U.N. resolutions, plans and referendums, the Greek and Turkish Cypriots seem no closer to reunification on their little island. Croatia, by contrast, solved its problem with the breakaway Serbs in the state of Krajina in 1995 with a massive, U.S.-encouraged armed assault. Virtually all of Krajina's Serbian population of 200,000 fled. Few returned.

Perhaps the Croatian example is what Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was hoping to emulate when he launched his attack on South Ossetia, which then went so dreadfully wrong for him.

In Sukhumi, I met Stanislav Lakoba, the man in charge of security, who might have warned Saakashvili of what awaited him. Lakoba scoffed when I suggested that Georgia was pouring millions into its armed forces and might one day attack. That, he said, would be "suicide." Clearly, he knew what he was talking about.

In the Abkhaz Foreign Ministry, the flags of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria stood next to one another. Their leaders had just been meeting.

Alongside their banners was that of Russia.

Without Moscow's support, none of the breakaways could survive. Quite apart from the military protection that Russia gives them, they use the ruble, speak more Russian than their own languages, and Russia has distributed

passports to their people. But Russia is in a curious situation. It had, until now, claimed to support the territorial integrity of states. On Thursday, Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, did a volte face. The world, he said, in a dramatic change of position, "can forget about any talk about Georgia's territorial integrity."

This was surely received as good news in Abkhazia and South Ossetia -- but Russia should remember that the breakaways have their own agendas. Ossetian officials whom I met in their capital, Tskhinvali, dream of a union with their kin in North Ossetia, which was left within Russia in the dismantling of the Soviet Union. Whether this would be as part of Russia or as an independent Greater Ossetia remains to be seen. This might seem fanciful now, but who knows what will happen to Russia in the future? Chechnya has, after all, already tried to break away. One day, it probably will try again.

Meanwhile, the Abkhaz just want to be left alone. When the Soviet Union split apart, they were a mere 18% of the population of Abkhazia. Now, although very much in control, they are still only 45% of its approximately 200,000 people, the rest being Georgians who live in the south, Armenians and some others. Hundreds of thousands of Georgians who fled in the early 1990s would like to come home, but the Abkhaz resist, fearing that once again they would become an insignificant minority in their own homeland.

They don't shout this from the rooftops, but the Abkhaz -- unlike the Ossetians -- distrust the Russians. The Russian czarist invasions of the 19th century sent huge numbers of their people into exile in Turkey. They faced wholesale deportations to Siberia under Stalin, who resettled Georgians to Abkhazia, sowing the seeds of the conflicts we are reaping today.

International law is not much help in sorting out what should happen with breakaways either. Ask an international lawyer, or someone who supports one breakaway case or another, and soon it is clear: Two principles -- self-determination and the right of a nation to its territorial integrity -- stand in conflict. Court rulings on them cannot be enforced anyway. In 1975, the International Court of Justice ruled that the people of the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara, which had been occupied by Morocco in the same year, had the right to self-determination. They are still waiting to exercise that right, still occupied by Morocco.

The situation with Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia on Feb. 17, is similar to the current one, especially from the point of view of international law. Kosovo was a province within Serbia in the old Yugoslavia, just as Abkhazia and South Ossetia were autonomous parts of Soviet Georgia. So, argues Serbia (with the support of Russia), the "provincial" Kosovars should not have the same right of self-determination as the old Yugoslav or Soviet republics.

But the Kosovars (90% of whom are now ethnic Albanians), like the Ossetians and Abkhaz, assert that they have the right to rule themselves. Serbia conquered Kosovo in 1912. But when regions were reshuffled after World War II, no one asked the Kosovo Albanians if they wanted once again to be part of Serbia and Yugoslavia. Clearly, they would have said that they did not.

The U.S. backed the right of the Albanians to self-determination and in 1999 led NATO in a 78-day bombing campaign against Serbia during the Kosovo war.

In Georgia, however, the politics of Kosovo have been turned on their head. The U.S. supports Georgia's territorial integrity while Russia bombs it on behalf of separatists. And Russia is mustering the same arguments in support of Abkhaz separatists as the U.S. did in support of an independent Kosovo.

Some editorialists have argued that Kosovo's independence has set a precedent that Moscow is now following. They seem to me to be obscuring the point and confusing the issue for ordinary readers. The simple truth is that whatever the rules, the (contested) laws and indeed the rights or wrongs of the issue, might makes right.

Indeed, Bosko Jaksic, a Serbian commentator writing in the daily Politika on Aug. 11, has it exactly to the point. "It is high time we finally understood that the mighty do as they please and the small do as they must." Politicians, he says, "can continue their debate as to whether Kosovo has set a precedent or not, but it turns out that realpolitik has its own rules." That may be a shame but, as the events of the last 10 days have shown, it also is starkly true.

Tim Judah covers the Balkans for the Economist. He is the author of "The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia" and the forthcoming "Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know."

---